

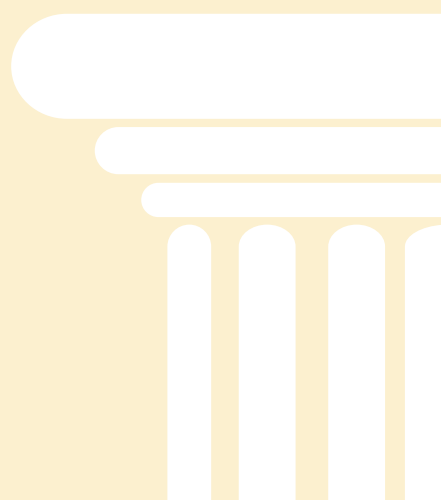


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Strengthening EU Democracy Support as a Task for the Polish Presidency – lessons learnt and challenges ahead

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DISCUSSION PAPERS



Key Conclusions & Recommendations

- The Presidency in the Council of the European Union presents Poland with an excellent opportunity for strengthening the recognition of democracy support as a strategic objective of EU foreign policy. Thanks to its transitional experience and more recently acquired expertise as a provider of democracy assistance, Poland is better situated than most EU members to put democracy support higher on the EU agenda. However, such a task can only be accomplished if Poland takes advantage of **previous efforts and achievements** in this policy area.
- Poland should join like-minded countries in closely monitoring **the implementation of the Council conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations**¹ in Brussels as well as in third countries and use its leverage – increased thanks to the EU Presidency – in preparations of the comprehensive report on the implementation of the Council conclusions due by early 2012.
- As long as Poland is willing to bring about change to the debate on EU support of democracy it should do so in **strong partnership with the civil society sector**.
- Giving priority of its EU Presidency to preparation of the new Multiannual Financial Framework, Poland should **incorporate the lessons learnt from the implementation of the Council conclusions into discussions on upgrading relevant financial instruments**, especially the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and related regulations. Poland should strongly oppose any attempts to terminate EIDHR.
- In a follow-up to the debate on Council conclusions as well as Polish efforts to stimulate the interest of European donors in the situation in Belarus and in support of democratic movements in the European neighbourhood in general, Poland should raise again the idea of the **European Consensus on Democracy**. The Consensus should be favourable to increasing the flexibility of the EU in cooperation with other donors, particularly the U.S., an issue often raised by Poland.
- During its Presidency, Poland should lend its support to making better use of the Central and Eastern European transition experience in the EU policies on development, human rights and democratisation.
- In resumption of efforts to establish a separate EU body specialising in providing democracy assistance at arms-length from other EU institutions, Poland should **look into the possibility of joining endeavors of the European Partnership for Democracy** – a foundation that has risen from similar **drift of thinking** several years ago.
- As an important regional player, Poland should work out its own concept of flexible support of democracy and human rights even in difficult environments and establish a national scheme detached from development cooperation that would enable appropriate financing and co-financing of projects aimed at support of democracy, human rights and empowerment of civil society, including the possibility to support unregistered organisations and individual human rights defenders.
- As a committed Visegrad Group member Poland could help establish a V4 strategic framework and a consultation mechanism on policy on democracy and human rights, in cooperation with the Czech Republic holding the V4 Presidency in 2011 – 2012.

¹ Hereinafter referred also as Council conclusions or Council conclusions on Democracy

Introduction

The initial reaction of the European Union to the wave of democratic revolutions in its southern neighbourhood can best be described as rather slow and weak. The EU was unprepared for such a turn of events and this unpreparedness was a result of the ambivalent attitude towards democracy as a strategic objective for EU foreign policy.

When falsified elections and a crack-down on the opposition had taken place in Belarus a month before the Arab Spring, information about these developments started to arrive to computers of activists, officials, and journalists in the EU despite the Christmas break. It was soon followed by detailed monitoring reports, media articles and analyses produced by various independent Belarusian organisations, surviving and working for the most part thanks to the engagement of the West and support coming from abroad, including from the EU. Whatever shortcomings can be identified in the policy of the EU towards Belarus, they do not result from lack of information and contacts on the ground but rather from indecisiveness and incoherence of various EU players and uncoordinated use of various policy instruments.

Nevertheless, information and analysis from ground level is a prerequisite of any reasonable policy on democracy support. Maintaining systematic contacts with the local environment needs to be combined with effective donors' coordination and across-the-board mainstreaming of democracy support. Observing the overthrow of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, the EU seemed to have no alternative to the existing policy almost exclusively oriented towards the non-democratic governments of these countries.

The most vocal advocates of providing support to civic opposition in Belarus have been widely referring to the so-called transition experience, mainly of those EU Member States that had to overcome their communist past. The comparison between the EU's reaction to events following falsified elections in Belarus and to revolutions in the Arab world points out the so far underestimated part of the transition experience: that the effective support of democracy should start even before transition gains the momentum. Obviously no external actor can call such momentum or decide about the character of the regime, but responsible external actors should support the early emergence of a genuine democratic alternative.

The recent events in Belarus and North Africa once again demonstrate that the empowerment of civil society, in the widest sense of the term, capable of producing a democratic alternative in favourable momentum has to become an autonomous objective of the EU democracy support. Civil society is a credible promoter of democratic change and ensures its sustainability. It creates an environment in which the social demand for democratic change originates and further defines itself and from which the alternative elites are recruited. But as the situation in undemocratic countries shows, genuine civil society is always an enemy of the regime. In such an environment civil society organisations cannot emerge and work in an unhindered and sufficient way. Therefore civil society needs to be recognised within and boosted from intellectual and cultural circles, academia, independent media, the internet community, youth initiatives, etc.. While dealing with dictators anywhere in the world the EU has to abide by its own principles and commitments and to spread and encourage adherence to universal values: human dignity (fundamental human rights including economic rights), fairness (justice, rule of law and equality) and the right to have a say (democratic participation, freedom of speech). Civil society should be considered an adequate partner for such dialogue.

In his speech before the Sejm on Polish foreign policy on 16 March 2011, Minister Radosław Sikorski made the following reference to democracy support inspired by the Polish experience with the transition to democracy: *"The political and economic transformation in Poland was made easier by the*

support of our friends. [...] Now we are helping others. [...] We have been consistent in linking development projects with support for democracy, also at the local level. [...] We sympathise with peoples who demand freedom." This statement should be read in the context of the objectives of the Polish EU Presidency.

Poland, as a country that itself overcame communist dictatorship, a country with a respectable record of people's opposition against repression, has the necessary potential to stand firmly for making support of democracy and human rights one of the European Union's outstanding foreign policy features. Numerous former activists of the Solidarity movement holding prominent positions in current political and public life in Poland are well placed to help produce a new impetus to refresh the Union's interest in support of democracy. Having built upon its own experience of the largely underground Solidarity Movement (without its human and intellectual potential the Polish transition to democracy would hardly be sustainable in the long term) as well as upon successful democratic change in the 1990s, Poland has already developed its own solid expertise in democracy assistance in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Polish Members of the European Parliament – including the President of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek in particular – constitute a distinct asset of political power and influence. The experienced stake-holders such as the European Partnership for Democracy² point out the role of the European Parliament in the newly designed institutional set up of the European Union, mainly the increased powers of scrutiny over the European Commission vested by the Lisbon Treaty. EPD also reminds the resolution passed by the EP on 22 October, 2009, in support of democracy building that added momentum to the final stages of negotiations on the Council conclusions on Democracy Support. Working hand in hand with the representation in the European Parliament, Poland has an extraordinary chance of raising the profile of democracy support in EU external relations.

Implementation of the Council Conclusions on Democracy Support

According to experts, all priorities a Presidency wants to put forth should already be on the EU agenda; introducing a new idea is unlikely to bring tangible results during the six-month term. This should come as a recommendation to the Polish foreign ministry to look for agenda items that could serve as a vehicle for the Presidency ambitions rather than evolve parallel efforts. In order to boost EU democracy support capacity, Poland should therefore become engaged first and foremost in the implementation of Council conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations (of November 17, 2009 and of December 13, 2010)³, probably so far the most significant achievement in the process of translating the EU's stated commitment to supporting democracy into practice in interactions with the outside world.

The Council conclusions on Democracy Support and its Agenda for Action from November 2009 provide an agreed base for work on better coherence, complementarity and coordination throughout the full range of actions across foreign and development policy. They go well beyond earlier, more general policy statements in strategic documents and individual efforts to adapt the policy and financial instruments to better serve their purpose. In these Conclusions (Towards Increased Coherence and Effectiveness), the EU recognises the broad range of tools at its disposal to support democracy in external relations.

² <http://www.epd.eu/epd-welcomes-council-conclusions-on-democracy-support>

³ <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/09/st16/st16081.en09.pdf>

The Council conclusions were the result of a joint cross-pillar initiative to increase the coherence and effectiveness of EU support to democracy building introduced in the first part of 2009 by the Czech Presidency and concluded by the Swedish Presidency towards the end of the same year. Next to achieving the Council conclusions, the aim of the initiative was to bring together and interlink EU Member States' experts on human rights and democracy assistance as well as on development cooperation (working groups COHOM and CODEV) and to start working on policy consolidation from scratch. This effort itself brought an interesting result witnessed by some EU Member States: it was the actual outset of cooperation of experts from these two different branches, each of which has a specific logic and terminology, even within one member state.

Both efforts were embedded in partnership with civil society organisations, considered to be key-stakeholders in EU democracy assistance. The Czech Presidency cooperated with the Brussels based European Partnership for Democracy⁴, the national NGO platforms Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights (DEMAS)⁵ and the Czech Forum for Development Cooperation (FoRS)⁶, the Swedish Presidency involved the broad expertise of the International IDEA – Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance⁷ based upon tailored global consultations on the EU's role in democracy building. There is no other way for designing strategy of supporting democracy through civil society without partnership with civil society. Insofar as Poland is willing to bring about change to the EU support of democracy, it should do so in strong partnership with the civil society sector.

The Council conclusions set out the primary task to the European Commission as the implementing body. But the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the External Action Service and – last but not least – the Member States, including their individual diplomatic missions in third countries, have important roles to play if the stated goals of coherence, coordination and complementarity are to be attained. As a first step in the implementation, the Council approved a list of pilot countries⁸ in December 2010. Both in Brussels and in third countries through national diplomatic representations, Poland might take an active role in discussions on the implementation in pilot countries, especially in those where Poland has its own unique expertise. As the Council conclusions envisage, the outcome of such a discussion should include the preparation of democracy-centred country profiles and gap analyses as well as a list of on-going co-operation efforts in the field of democracy support and an evaluation of their efficiency. On the Brussels level, relevant Council formations should require regular information on progress achieved and feed-back at the headquarters level for the “comprehensive report on the implementation” due by early 2012. The appropriate coherent mixture of instruments capable of filling the identified gaps is obviously not solely comprised of instruments managed by the European Commission. It is and it should be as rich as the variety of stake-holders active in the field of EU democracy support.

Although caused at least partially by the institutional reshuffle after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, the so far slow pace of implementation of the Council conclusions should urge the interested Member States to be ready and as supportive as possible in order to obtain a good-quality report in a year's time. To this purpose, the Polish government should cooperate with the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and other like-minded partners and relevant stake-holders. The involvement of Polish civil society organisations from Grupa Zagranica and their partners from the above-mentioned Member States can help overcome possible lack of political support.

⁴ <http://www.epd.eu/>

⁵ <http://www.demas.cz/en/>

⁶ <http://www.fors.cz/en>

⁷ <http://www.idea.int/>

⁸ Moldova – for the Eastern Neighbourhood, Kyrgyzstan – Central Asia, Lebanon – for the Southern Neighbourhood, Ghana, Benin and Solomon Islands – for ACP, Bolivia – for Latin America, Mongolia, Philippines, Indonesia and Maldives – in Asia

Financial mechanisms

The results of the process of pilot implementation of the Council conclusions on Democracy should be properly reflected in the framework of EU financial instruments for the period after 2013 in order to maximise the potential of current schemes. The elaboration of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework will provide an opportunity to more deeply integrate the objectives of the Council conclusions into financial mechanisms (including EIDHR, DCI, ENPI and other geographic instruments as well as targeted instruments such as Governance Initiative for ACP countries and Africa and its Governance Incentive Tranche or the Stability Instrument). Likewise, the preparations of the new Financial Perspectives 2014 – 2020, which is a priority of the Polish Presidency, constitute new opportunities for a systematic use of transition experience in the framework of EU financial instruments, for example, by earmarking funds dedicated to transition cooperation.

The ‘complementarities’ and ‘interconnections’ between democracy support and other co-operation efforts covering areas such as the introduction of principles of democratic governance, public administration reform and institution building, particularly in view of the expansion of the use of instruments such as the Budget Support and the Sector Wide Approaches, should be identified for the next programming period. Mainstreaming democratisation in external policies should also mean that support provided to development countries will be to a much lesser extent seen as purely technical.

Reporting on the EU Agenda for Action will create a springboard for further adjustment of current EU instruments, including their legal bases. From the point of view of democracy support, this applies especially to the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The key strength of this instrument lies in the possibility to provide assistance independently of the consent of third-country governments and other public authorities, thus addressing primarily local and international civil society organisations. It extends the eligibility to use the funding also to unregistered entities and individuals.

Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement of the EIDHR to better address the most urgent challenges. Complementarity remains to be the main challenge of EIDHR, i.e., the only use of this instrument in more “sensitive” situations when other programs cannot be used. Even though the European Commission seems to be aware of that, more support and engagement of Member States is needed. The on-going evaluation of EIDHR should offer not only lessons for EIDHR but also for national schemes, should they intend to be complementary to the existing EU mechanism. But even without the study results, it is clear that in countries where there is no EU delegation or where they have limited operational capacity, the EU lacks appropriate means to intervene through EIDHR.

Attention should be paid to the continuation and deepening of the reform this instrument underwent during the last revision towards the end of 2006. The policy brief of PASOS of June, 2010⁹ lists the areas where deepening of the reform is most needed. According to the PASOS analysis, the flexibility already introduced in the instrument needs to be deepened, especially through re-granting or sub-granting in order for the funding to better reach civil society organisations and individuals. The amount for re-granting should increase with the revised financial regulation and it should be made possible to have re-granting as the main activity of the grant. More effort is needed to strengthen the capacity of local NGOs to be able to secure funding from EIDHR’s Country Based Support Scheme by training them in the specific skills of writing

⁹ Walking the Tightrope of Democracy Aid; The long and winding road towards flexible, well-targeted EU funding for democracy and human rights, Policy Brief by Věra Řiháčková, EUROPEUM/PASOS, June 2010

proposals, to further simplify procedures as well as clarify eligibility rules for non-registered entities in order to improve their chances to obtain EU funding in practice. The revision should also be an opportunity for easing the remaining hurdles for beneficiaries such as the fact that VAT and other types of taxes cannot be considered eligible costs under grant contracts.

PASOS and other stakeholders recommend the overall raising of the profile of democracy support to the level of priority given to support of human rights. More focus is required on democracy issues beyond elections. The EU tends to put much of its efforts for election observation and monitoring but still without a proper follow-up to the extensive reports of the Election Observation Missions, often producing analyses and recommendations of high quality. On the other hand, experience shows that only a small minority of Member States takes part in discussions on Election Observation Missions planning and evaluation and is at all interested in contributing to discussions in appropriate working groups. Thus the European Commission often lacks feedback in this regard. The Polish Presidency might help to introduce this important issue to a greater number of Member States, especially the most recent ones, by setting an example.

The recent developments in North Africa reveal the lack of flexibility of the EIDHR in reaction to emergency situations. Although the EIDHR regulation¹⁰ contains flexibility formula providing for reaction in “unforeseen and exceptional circumstances not covered by the Strategy Paper”, such as ‘Special Measures’, giving the Commission flexibility of using up to 3 million euros from contingency funds, these measures have not yet been invoked. The problem most likely lies in the absence of implementation mechanisms. Here, the experience with block funding for support of human rights defenders available under EIDHR through organisations providing this support on the ground, such as Frontline or FIDH shows a possible way forward. As Poland has expressed doubts regarding the level of responsiveness of the EU in such cases of emergency, it should use the opportunity to explore such an option. This, however, requires detailed, diligent work on accommodation of the existing mechanisms rather than heavy political weight and visible changes.

With the support of the Polish Presidency, proposals to terminate or substitute EIDHR should be vigorously opposed in view of the fact that no other financial instrument can replace the role of EIDHR in financing projects without prior consent of the authorities of the country where a project takes place.

EU Consensus on Democracy

From East to West and North to South of Europe the notion of democracy differs and so does the idea of how the EU should approach this challenge. Democratisation policies of individual Member States are diversified. There are enthusiasts and already active donors and there are others with rather lukewarm positions, having no national schemes of support of democracy abroad and a viewpoint closer to the principle of non-interference. In fact, these positions go hand in hand with Member States’ overall ambiguous support of the European Union’s foreign policy being value-based. Between a group of “principalists” with a conscientious approach to respecting human rights and democracy across the Union’s external policies and a group of “formalists” that do not see a problem in the gap between declarations and daily foreign policy practice, there is perhaps a majority of Member States whose positions change according to which third country is on the agenda.

Although efforts aimed at broader agreement on what is the shared notion of democracy and what the EU should eventually follow in its policy of democracy support unavoidably shrink the

¹⁰ Regulation (EC) No 1889/2006

room for manoeuvre for each Member State, they have taken place. Nevertheless, discussions leading to the aforementioned Council conclusions have so far tested the limits of an agreement.

During the Czech Presidency of the EU, discussions in working groups on human rights and democracy (COHOM) and on development (CODEV) failed to produce an EU definition of democracy. However, these discussions gave rise to a paper providing points of departure for EU support of democracy and “common principles and key elements of democracy” that the EU should focus on in order to assist third countries to follow their own specific paths to democracy. Although the paper was a consensual product of a several months’ long debate, it was adopted as just a “rolling report from discussions” without a chance to reach the upper levels of hierarchy of the Council. Nevertheless, it was the first time COHOM seriously tackled the issue of democracy that it has had in its mandate since 1999.

Also lacking was a reference to the EU Consensus on Democracy that would constitute a comprehensive agreement on what the EU means by “democracy” and “democratisation”¹¹ that would draw a long term EU strategy for democracy assistance, provide for a clearer profile of policies of democracy support and, not least, co-ordinate use of all available means at the Union and Member State level. The (insufficient) extent of political will to reach the Consensus reflects the (limited) willingness of Member States to cede another part of territory for manoeuvre. Whereas Council conclusions are mostly seen as determining for decisions concerning support of democracy taken in Brussels and obligatory mainly for the institutions, the Consensus is perceived as much more binding for Member States’ decision making in capitals.

The assumed extent of the Consensus that might be linking human rights, democracy, development and security is an ambitious goal given the so far intergovernmental character of foreign policy. Not less ambitious seems to be the assumed depth of the Consensus, intending to embrace the European Parliament – the members of which may be in opposition to national governments – as well as other stake-holders such as independent civil and political society, given the varying culture of openness and transparency in foreign policy decision-making across the European Union.

However, discussions on the future of a European foreign policy cannot avoid an agreement on to what extent European values and principles should be influential on policy making. With the European External Action Service in place and with its gradually growing capacity, political weight and subsequent independence, Member States will have to elaborate more on the guiding principles of EEAS actions.

The European Consensus is supposed to be a statement of political commitment but it should have significant impact on coherence of democracy assistance as well. The knowledge of each other’s activities in the field, the objectives followed, and the experience gained is still insufficient among European donors. Despite limited capacity and resources, much work is being done in parallel and much know-how and experience is being lost on the way.

Important processes have been put in motion in order to streamline EU democracy assistance, such as gradual reform of EIDHR, on-going from late 2006, or the implementation of the Council conclusions on Democracy Support. Nevertheless, these processes, capable of reorganising the work on lower and middle administrative levels, need to get unequivocal backing from top politicians; the on-going bottom up process should meet the top-down support in order to achieve unquestionable long term results.

¹¹ See report from the conference “Building consensus about EU policies on Democracy Support”, Prague, March 9-10, 2009 at www.epd.eu/uploads/68f92bc22fcba0184b90bbb2e6e73b62.pdf

For an ambitious country like Poland, promoting its historical experience with building democracy after successful dismantling of a totalitarian regime, a country with a strong and enlightened representation in the European Parliament and a solid base of experts outside the government, such a task would be a worthy endeavour for the EU Presidency and an achievement of historical significance.

Capitalising on the transition experience of the EU Member States

Although various efforts have taken place to embrace the European transition experience, especially of Central and Eastern European EU Member States, in reality the experience with the overall socio-economic transition to democracy as well as the work for change that preceded the fall of communist regimes remain underestimated as a whole, as have the experience and potential of civil society actors from this region.

Upon the recommendation of the Council to capitalise on the transition experience the European Commission has developed the European Transition Compendium (ETC)¹², a comprehensive summary of the experiences of those countries that would make such information available for the purposes of development assistance. The ETC is meant to complement the already existing EU development toolbox with a “living pool of expertise”. The expertise remains to be assessed with regards to potential “consumers” and ways of “operationalisation” of the ETC to be identified with regards to needs and specificities of the different countries facing different transition challenges. Where appropriate, the transition cooperation should be used in EU joint programming exercises and in relevant dialogues with concerned third countries.

Poland should join the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, the countries that submitted their concrete proposals for the way forward in implementation of the ETC upon the invitation of the High Representative Ashton. The upcoming discussion on the implementation of the ETC seems to be so far the most developed attempt to capitalise on the transition experience, specifically in development. As a result of the long term engagement of the abovementioned Member States it has full support of not only Commissioner Piebalgs but also of Member States beyond the circle of ETC contributors. The fact that “transition cooperation” has been picked as a first topic for joint coordination of the new EU Member States shows that this represents a real asset and an added value to what the other advanced donors in the EU can offer.

The transition experience is obviously relevant not only for development cooperation but also for the policy on human rights and democracy support. The Central and Eastern European EU Member States have become respectable providers of support to democratic movements and civil society, especially in Eastern Europe. The expertise these countries have already developed over the years of autonomous working in the field should also be explored and taken into consideration. Poland could grant a voice during its Presidency to advocating for the better use of the transition experience in EU policies on development, human rights and democratisation in general.

European Endowment for Democracy

On the eve of the EU Presidency, in response to the developments in Belarus before the end of 2010 and to those in North Africa in early 2011, Poland appealed to the responsibility of the EU for

¹² Publicly available on the website of DG DEVCO: http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/who/partners/eu-12-member-states/index_en.htm

supporting democratic processes in the European neighbourhood. In this regard, Poland proposed the establishment of an independent body that would enable the EU to effectively support democratic movements and to react to situations when these movements happen to gain momentum for a democratic change. At the Foreign Affairs Council on January 31, Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski proposed the establishment of the European Endowment for Democracy as a part of the agenda of the Polish Presidency. According to the subsequent Polish non-paper, a model for the EED should be the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy.

To assess this proposal in context it is useful to recapitulate the history of this kind of effort. The current Polish proposal seems to be a resumption of earlier discussions that some EU Member States, including Poland itself, have been introducing periodically since the West realised it was facing a global backlash against democracy promotion¹³ in 2006.

"The EU needs a new foreign policy instrument to promote democracy and human rights outside its borders. Democracy assistance should become a more visible and more effective element of the EU external policies" stated Edward MacMillan-Scott, the Vice-President of the European Parliament and then Chairman of the EP Democracy Caucus, and Markus Meckel Member of Bundestag and former German Foreign Minister and others in their Manifesto for a European Democracy Foundation of spring 2006.

"Existing EU arrangements for a financial support of civil society and democratic activities in the Eastern European and South Caucasus Regions are insufficient and inadequate. The EU has a normative and policy framework but some of its MS periodically come to an end that the commitments and ambitions does not meet the actual performance," wrote Lithuanian Foreign Minister Antanas Valionis in a letter to his colleagues with a view to promote the idea of European Democracy Foundation in June 2006.

Poland is right when pointing out the need to look into the future and project how the EU will be able to sustain democratic processes in its neighbourhood and to address hopes and aspirations of democratic-minded and reform-oriented societies in many parts of the world. Even the laudable efforts linked to the implementation of the Council conclusions on democracy support do not take into sufficient consideration how the EU could catalyse democratic thinking and foster the drive towards reforms and transition in societies before a change even gains its momentum.

The room for an initiative of this kind remains, e.g., in situations when the EU does not have its delegation in a particular country or only a limited operational capacity; when state authorities in the country of origin of potential beneficiaries make financing impossible; in cases of negative interference from the side of the government; in situations when a greater level of confidentiality is required; in cases when the capacity of local civil society is so limited that the organisations are unable to apply for funding (e.g., from CBSS) so as in very specific and highly contentious situations where the EU cannot reach a feasible consensus concerning its policy towards a particular country.

Nevertheless, the type of organisation which the Polish Foreign Minister proposes does already exist, although not in its originally expected full operational capacity. The European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), launched in Brussels on 15 April, 2008, under the auspices of the former Presidents of the Czech Republic and Germany, Václav Havel and Richard von Weizsäcker, as well as European Commission President José Manuel Barroso has been created as "an operational facility working at arm's length from the institutions of the EU, capable of timely responses to demands where and when they are most needed" that "should provide flexible funding instrument to support democratic reform processes and programmes [and be] capable of operating at a greater level of suppleness, responsiveness and risk."

¹³ Term defined by Thomas Carothers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March/April 2006; http://www.carnegieendowment.org/experts/index.cfm?fa=expert_view&expert_id=9

The EPD has in fact checked the limits of the current EU institutional arrangements. Although the European Commission has not committed direct funding to the new foundation – due to the application of the respective financial regulations – the EPD has started to work and serves as a platform for knowledge exchange and joint advocacy initiatives and as an interface for project implementation in third countries. The EPD has elaborated the principles of a Flexible Funding Facility that would complement the work of European political and civil society foundations and the current EU instruments in democracy assistance. EPD is the only tangible result of previous attempts to establish an independent EU expert and grant-making body of the abovementioned qualities. Not the worse, throughout the process of its establishment and its first three years of existence, the EPD has collected a truly European experience. With the EIDHR and related regulations soon to be revised, the EPD is therefore an excellent base to continue efforts in this regard. The multinational Board of the EPD has consisted so far of representatives from the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia and remains open to any new committed members.

Doing homework

Besides looking at what could and should be done better on the Brussels level when it comes to democracy support, starting with the overall mainstreaming of the issues of democracy and human rights in the policies on external relations and ending with the shape and functioning of the financial mechanisms, EU Member States should do their homework and look at their own mechanisms of support of democracy and how they function on the ground.

Discussion on making the EU instruments more flexible and responsive should be therefore accompanied by establishing or reviewing relevant national mechanisms and by strengthening donor coordination, starting with the coordination of local EU diplomatic missions and other donors and stakeholders.

For Poland and all the Visegrad Group it should be obvious that giving human rights and democracy support a priority should start at home and on the regional level. The Visegrad Group provides both room and consultative mechanisms for coordination of such efforts.

V4 should act in coordination and its members should avoid the perception that they promote competing initiatives. As a committed Visegrad Group member, Poland could help establish a V4 strategic framework and a consultation mechanism on policy on democracy and human rights. A network of Visegrad think-tanks, a project currently explored by the Visegrad Fund, should be invited to get involved. Looking at the program of the Czech Presidency in V4 in 2011 – 2012, the Czech Republic is ready to cooperate. V4 should consider its joint engagement in reintroducing the idea of the EU Consensus on Democracy.

About the authors

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ISBN: 978-83-7689-034-0